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SUBJECT: BELGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER DE GUCHT'S MAY 27-28  
VISIT TO IRAQ

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht traveled to Iraq on May 27-28. While Belgium has been absent from Iraq for several years, his visit indicates a new willingness to be more active and cooperative with efforts to build security and good governance in the country. De Gucht met with Prime Minister Al Maliki and Foreign Minister Zebari, as well as U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill, and traveled to Erbil to meet with Kurdish officials. He found the Iraqis eager to convince him of growing stability and investment opportunities. He was accompanied by some Belgian companies on his trip, and reportedly a contract for water treatment plant construction was signed. De Gucht encouraged the Iraqis to develop gas routes into the Nabucco pipeline project, but did not find great enthusiasm for the idea. At his own request, he met with Wijdan Mikhail Salim, Minister for Human Rights, mainly to encourage Iraq to reduce or eliminate its reliance on the death penalty. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On June 3, Emboffs met with the Jean-Luc Bodson, Deputy Chief of Staff for the Foreign Minister, and Yves Rogister, Middle East Desk Officer, to discuss Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht's recent trip to Baghdad. Bodson said that the visit was the first by a Belgian Foreign Minister to Iraq since 1990. He blamed Belgium's unfavorable attitude toward U.S. actions in Iraq under the Bush Administration for Belgium's diplomatic absence from the Iraqi capital since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in ¶2003. At that time, Bodson said, the feeling was that Belgium "had nothing to offer." Now Belgium is becoming more interested in the reconstruction of Iraq, Bodson said.

¶3. (SBU) Note: Rogister has previously supplied us with the following data on Belgian assistance to Iraq:

-- One million euros in the framework of the Consolidated Appeal (CAP) for Iraq through OCHA. This contribution is earmarked for UNHCR operations helping Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Iraq.

-- 250,000 euros for Mine Advisory Group (MAG), an NGO active in the field of mine clearing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in the area close to the Iraqi-Iranian border.

-- 250,000 euros for the UN General Trust Fund in order to finance the "middle ring" of the UNAMI's Protection Force.

-- Training in Belgium for Iraqi magistrates in the framework of the EU's EUJUSTLEX program. End Note.

¶4. (SBU) De Gucht's visit has been in the works for the past one to two years, partly influenced by Belgium's membership in the UN Security Council, but it had been slightly delayed by the December 2008 governmental crisis in Belgium. The purpose of the visit, Bodson said, was to take stock of the leadership in Baghdad, build bilateral trust, and seek out investment opportunities for Belgian businesses. The FM met with a large number of top officials in Iraq: Prime Minister

Nouri Al-Maliki, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Mahmud Zebari, Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Mikhail Salim and newly arrived U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill. Bodson said that the Iraqis were eager to convince De Gucht that the situation in Iraq is well on the way to stabilizing and that he should support investment by Belgian companies in the country. Bodson observed, however, that wearing of protective helmets and vests was still required outside the green zone in Baghdad. He was pleased that the feeling of danger was much reduced in Erbil, Kurdistan region, which was the only city De Gucht visited outside Baghdad.

15. (SBU) Besides investment, Maliki and Zebari sought Belgium's assistance in building confidence with Saudi Arabia, which is not comfortable with Iraq's increasingly Shia identity. They also were interested in reduction or elimination of reparation payments for the 1991 war owed to Kuwait. They discussed the status of Kirkuk with De Gucht. Bodson said that the Belgians hope that the UN Commission working there will help find solutions to allow people to live in greater harmony. De Gucht heard complaints about Iranian meddling in Iraq, and that the Iranians' influence is not for the better. In Erbil, De Gucht's message to the Kurds was that Belgium understands the problems there. The Kurdish authorities emphasized that their future is inside Iraq, despite deep wounds of history. They do seek much greater autonomy, Bodson said. They expressed a desire for better relations with Turkey and rejected the PKK, although they are having a hard time controlling the anti-Turkish rebels in remote border regions near Turkey. Bodson was impressed by the boom in construction in Erbil and the obvious, albeit unequally distributed, wealth on display.

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16. (SBU) De Gucht specifically requested to meet with Human Rights Minister Salim. He protested the frequency of executions and urged the elimination of the death penalty under Iraqi law. He told Salim that he worries the stock of international good will toward the Iraqi government is eroded by continuation of the death penalty. Salim said that although she was personally uncomfortable with the death penalty, given the high level of violence in the country popular will supports keeping it as a legal punishment.

17. (SBU) De Gucht had a meeting with U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill. He appreciated Hill's frank assessment of the situation in Iraq.

18. (SBU) A few Belgian companies accompanied De Gucht. Bodson said that Belgian companies, particularly from Flanders, are interested in investment opportunities in Iraq's infrastructure such as waste water treatment, electrical engineering, and port management. He said that one contract had been signed during the trip, which reportedly is for construction of 13 water treatment plants in Baghdad. It is possible that there could be a Belgian trade mission to Iraq, encouraged by the example of a recent, successful Korean mission that led to the opening of new hotels in Baghdad.

19. (SBU) De Gucht encouraged the possibility that Iraqi gas could flow into the Nabucco pipeline project. Bodson said the idea was not met with great enthusiasm. In Erbil, the Kurds expressed frustration with Baghdad's reluctance to allow oil and gas export projects to move forward quickly. Belgium sees potential investment opportunities in Iraq's oil and gas industry, Bodson said.

110. (SBU) Asked what the next steps are for Belgian-Iraqi relations, Bodson said that Belgium has no immediate plans to open a Belgian Embassy. Its Charge d'Affaires has been accredited to Iraq, however, and the Foreign Ministry plans to give him enough funds to travel to Baghdad twice a year. The GOB will continue to support governance projects in Iraq, including EUJUSTLEX, and its contributions to UNHCR for

assisting refugees in Jordan and Iraq. It also has accepted fifty Iraqi refugees (women at risk, and Palestinians) for resettlement in Belgium and is willing to consider taking more in the context of a European framework for dealing with the issue. Bodson also mentioned that Belgium has already canceled 80 percent of Iraq's 300 million euro debt to Belgium.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: Belgium is a long way from being a major player in Iraq issues, but De Gucht's visit signals an increasing interest in being more active and cooperative with efforts to build security and good governance in the country.  
End Comment.

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